

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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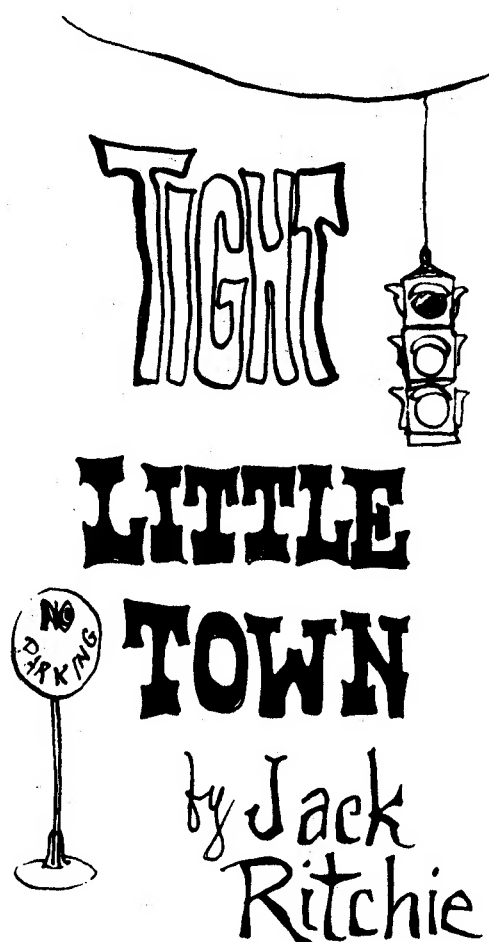
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te Editor
te Editor
Director

A fox does not visit a den of wolves unscathed, though the reverse may hold true.



WHILE I WAITED for my hamburger, I sipped coffee and watched the town's single traffic light turn green, yellow, red . . . green, yellow, red . . .

I wondered why a hill town of this size needed traffic lights at all. There seemed to be nothing moving but a boy on a bicycle.

The counterman brought me the hamburger. "Is that your car parked in front of O'Connel's Hardware?"

I looked back over my shoulder. My sedan was just out of sight, but from where the counterman stood, he could evidently see it.

He grinned faintly. "Another cup of coffee? It's on the house."

When I finished eating, I paid the tab, and went back to my car.

I found the local sheriff waiting. He was a big, paunchy man with light blue eyes, and came equipped with a large revolver and a full cartridge belt. He shook his head sadly. "Don't you know it's illegal to park in a loading zone?"

I studied the two portable *Loading Zone—No Parking* standards, one of them on the sidewalk at the head of my car and the other at the rear. "When I parked here, this wasn't a loading zone. There weren't any signs."

He smiled tolerantly. "Now, now, there's no sense in arguing about it. Those signs have been there for ten years or more. You just didn't notice them. I know you

wouldn't park here deliberately, but the law's the law and I got to uphold it."

I shrugged. "All right. Give me the ticket."

He shook his head again. "Can't do that, mister. You're a stranger in town. You might just tear up the ticket as soon as you're out of sight and forget the whole thing."

I smiled tightly. "In that case, I suppose I pay *you* the fine right now?"

"No, sir. I'm not authorized to impose or accept fines. I'll have to take you to the jailhouse and get Judge Pender to try you. It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes of your time."

I sighed and walked with him toward the jailhouse.

I had just left O'Connel's Cafe. Now we passed O'Connel's Hotel, O'Connel's Tavern, and O'Connel's Superette.

"Who is this man O'Connel?" I asked. "The one who seems to own the town."

"No one man owns the town," the sheriff said. "Those are all different O'Connells. As a matter of fact, I'm an O'Connel myself. Mike O'Connel."

A small black terrier greeted us enthusiastically as we opened the front door of the jailhouse.

"That's Freddie," the sheriff said. He bent down and patted the dog

affectionately on his sleek head.

"Where is Judge Pender?" I asked.

The sheriff consulted his large wristwatch. "More than likely he's still taking his afternoon nap. I'll drop over to his place and get him. Empty your pockets, please."

"Empty my pockets? Why the devil should I do that?"

"I've got to lock you up until I bring back the judge. Can't have you suddenly deciding to leave town while I'm gone. Not that I don't trust you, but I've got to be careful about strangers. And the rules say that I can't put you behind bars until I empty your pockets. I'll give you a receipt for everything."

I fumed, but I emptied my pockets. There really wasn't much: my wallet, keys, handkerchief, pen, and my checkbook.

"Count your money," O'Connel directed.

I did. "Ninety dollars and twenty-seven cents."

O'Connel searched me, but found nothing additional. He itemized the articles I'd put on his desk and handed me a receipt. Then he led me to the single cell in the back room, locked me up, and left to find Judge Pender.

Outside the cell, the dog, Freddie, wagged his stub tail, and then lay down. He napped cautiously, opening an eye now and then, ap-



parently to make certain that I was still behind bars.

After what might have been ten minutes, he suddenly sat up. Freddie tilted his head and seemed to be listening. He held the pose for nearly a minute and then began a rather plaintive howling.

In the distance, I heard the sound of a single-engined airplane. The noise increased, passed almost directly overhead, and faded away.

Freddie stopped his howling, scratched his right ear, and lay down again. He eyed me for a mo-

ment, wagged his tail, and resumed his nap.

Another ten minutes passed before the sheriff reappeared with his cell keys and led me back to the front of the building.

I found a white-haired man with a gavel seated behind the sheriff's desk. He was introduced as Judge Pender.

After the sheriff returned my possessions, Pender pounded the gavel. "Court is now in session. How do you plead, Mr. Randolph?"

"Not guilty," I said. "Those load-

ing-zone signs certainly weren't there when I parked my car."

Judge Pender chuckled. "Now, how many times have I heard that? What do you have to say about the signs, Sheriff O'Connel?"

The sheriff had taken off his hat. "Those loading-zone signs have been right there for more than ten years, Judge."

The judge used the gavel again. "Mr. Randolph, you are found guilty. The fine will be fifty dollars."

I blinked. "Fifty dollars? For parking in a loading zone? I never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life."

Pender frowned. "That last statement constitutes contempt of court. I fine you an additional forty dollars. That makes it a total of ninety dollars."

I opened my mouth to protest again, but the sheriff spoke up first.

"Better not say any more, Mr. Randolph. You're plumb out of cash now, except for the twenty-seven cents. One more contempt and I'd have to put you back in jail. The judge don't take checks."

I took a number of deep breaths and glowered. Then I handed the judge ninety dollars. "Am I free to go now?"

"Free as a bird, Mr. Randolph."

The sheriff followed me out of the building and then walked at my

side. "Nice little town we've got here. Of course we're a little economically depressed, but on the other hand, that means we have people here who'll work hard for a little less than the usual and not get too organized. It's a good place to open a shoe factory. You don't happen to know any—"

"No," I said. "I don't know anybody who wants to move a shoe factory."

We came to my car. I opened the passenger-side door and slid in.

The sheriff peered through the rear window. "What's that you got on the back seat—in the open and unwrapped?"

"I don't have a damn thing in the—" I turned to look and discovered that I was wrong. Several handfuls of what appeared to be sickly tobacco lay on some brown wrapping paper.

The sheriff clicked his tongue reprovingly. "By George, that's marijuana. Or grass, as we professional lawmen like to call it."

I protested. "But I never saw it before in my life until just now."

Sheriff O'Connel sighed. "I'd like to believe you, Mr. Randolph, but evidence is evidence and that's what I see."

I, and the marijuana, were taken back to the jailhouse.

I expected to see Judge Pender again, but he was not there. Fred-

die, however, was and he greeted me as an old friend.

"He likes you," Sheriff O'Connel said. "He don't take to everybody."

"I suppose you have lawyers in this town?" I asked.

He nodded. "Three of them. There's Ed O'Connel and his son, Ralph. And then there's Cyrus Whitman."

"Get me Whitman."

I was again relieved of the contents of my pockets—plus my belt and my necktie, this time—and put back into the cell.

Sheriff O'Connel departed to find Whitman and left me with Freddie.

After a minute or two, he sat up, his head tilted, listening. He began to howl and moments later I again heard the sound of another airplane as it approached, passed, and diminished into the distance.

Freddie lay down once more and closed his eyes.

Twenty minutes later, Sheriff O'Connel reappeared with a somewhat stout, smiling man with sparse hair.

"This is your lawyer," O'Connel said. "I'll just leave the two of you to have your conference in private."

He locked us both in and left again.

Whitman beamed. "Now let us face the facts. You are charged with the rather serious offense of the pos-

session of narcotics, namely marijuana."

"I never saw any of it before in my life."

"Of course not," he said cheerfully. "I believe you and I am a sharp judge of character. I *know* that you are not the type of person who would knowingly possess, use, transport, or sell marijuana. You are the victim of unfortunate circumstances. Some other person deposited that marijuana on the back seat of your car, possibly mistaking it for one of his *contacts*."

"He left it there in an open package?"

Whitman chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. "Obviously the string on the package was insecure and it opened by itself. Things like that are bound to happen every now and then."

"And this is what you're going to tell the judge, whoever he might be?"

"Judge Pender."

"And he's going to believe that story?"

Whitman smiled. "My dear, dear fellow, we are a civilized community. We realize that many, many times an entirely innocent individual may fall into this kind of an unfortunate trap. But Judge Pender is a most discerning individual. And a *kind* man. I *know* that when I have a talk with him he will see im-

mediately that you are truly innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever and dismiss the charge."

"You guarantee that?"

"Absolutely." He hesitated a moment. "However, there is one *slight* matter we might as well take care of right now."

"And what is that?"

"My fee."

I studied my fingernails. "And how much is that?"

"Eight hundred dollars."

"*Eight* hundred dollars?"

He sighed. "I don't *want* to charge you that much, but I am *forced* to. You must remember that you are charged with a felony, and those things come high. The State Bar Association is very *strict* about the *minimum* fees we *must* charge. It's in our Code of Ethics, you know. I really have no choice in the matter."

Outside of the cell bars, Freddie suddenly sat up. He tilted his head slightly, listening.

"Do you have an airport near town?" I asked.

Whitman blinked at the change of subject. "Well . . . yes. That would be Red O'Connel's Airport. For small private planes."

I nodded. "There goes another one taking off."

Whitman listened. "I don't hear a thing."

"It's a one-engine job," I said.

"It could use a little tune-up."

Freddie began howling.

Now Whitman heard the plane approach and pass over, as had the others.

Freddie lay down again.

I went to the cell bars and raised my voice. "Sheriff, would you bring me my checkbook and my pen?"

He brought the articles and once again departed.

I went through my checkbook and found that I had a balance of \$802.17. "You're in luck," I told Whitman. "I can just make it. How shall I make out the check?"

"To cash will be just fine."

I made out the check and handed it to Whitman.

He beamed. "Now I'll have a talk with the judge in his private chambers. We lawyers settle most of our cases that way, you know."

"I won't have to be present?"

"No. I don't think that will be necessary."

After Whitman was let out of my cell, I went to my window. I watched as he turned into O'Connel's Tavern.

I called for the sheriff.

He came to the bars. "Something I can do for you?"

"It just occurred to me that I don't really know your name. Your *full* name, I mean."

"Michael Jerome O'Connel."

"Could you please repeat that?"

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I'm somewhat hard of hearing."

He repeated his name somewhat louder.

"What day is it today?" I asked. "I mean the *exact* date."

He glanced at a wall calendar. "Friday, April 9, 1971."

I cupped my ear.

He raised his voice again. "Friday, April 9, 1971."

"Thank you," I said. "That was just fine."

Half an hour later, Sheriff O'Connel unlocked my cell and led me to his office, where I found both Whitman and Judge Pender waiting. There was the faint aroma of beer about the both of them.

Whitman rubbed his hands. "Everything has been settled. The judge here has most magnanimously agreed to dismiss the charges against you."

"Then I am free to go?"

"Of course," Judge Pender said. He chuckled slightly. "Now, you wouldn't try to stop payment on that check, would you? It could lead to all kinds of trouble. After all, Sheriff O'Connel is a *bona fide* sheriff, and Cyrus Whitman is a *bona fide* lawyer, and I am a *bona fide* judge elected by the people of this fair county."

Whitman seconded that. "Failure to pay a lawyer's fee is considered contempt of court around here."

I smiled. "Stopping payment is

the last thought I had in mind. By the way, did you say your name was Whittier?"

"No," Whitman said. "Whitman. Cyrus O'Connel Whitman."

I cupped my ear. "Cyrus Donald Whitman?"

He automatically raised his voice. "No. Cyrus O'Connel Whitman."

"Mr. Randolph is a little hard of hearing," the sheriff explained.

I edged toward the door. "Well, it's been nice doing business with you folks. Who knows, though, I might be seeing all of you again soon."

Whitman frowned thoughtfully. "How can Randolph be hard of hearing when he can hear those airplanes take off from O'Connel's Field even before Freddie does? And we know how sharp Freddie's hearing is."

They looked at Freddie. He grinned obligingly.

Whitman looked at the sheriff. "Just what made you think Randolph was hard of hearing?"

"He said so. And he asked me to repeat things. Louder."

"What things?"

"My name. And the date."

The three of them now stared at me.

O'Connel rubbed his jaw. "Come to think of it, he's just a mite too cheerful about all of this. All of the

others sure raised the roof here."

Whitman had been entertaining a thought. "Randolph asked us to repeat certain important things louder. Like names and dates. You don't suppose that every word we've said to him has been . . . recorded?"

Sheriff O'Connel stared at me. "I searched him. I didn't find anything."

Whitman shook his head. "This is the age of miniaturization. For all we know he could have the recording device in one of his teeth. Maybe even in a strand of *hair*."

The three of them seemed about to perspire.

"I *knew* it couldn't last forever," the sheriff said finally.

Whitman turned on him. "What do you mean *forever*? We've only been at this three weeks."

Judge Pender licked his lips. "We were only going to keep it up until we got the town's outdoor swimming pool paid for. We put sixty percent of what we took into the pool—so to speak—and we kept forty percent for expenses, overhead, and administration."

I put my hand on the doorknob. "I really must be going."

"Just one moment," the sheriff said quickly. "I'm afraid that a *terrible*, but honest, mistake has been made. I just now remember where I've seen that marijuana before. It's

grass. *Real* grass." He laughed lightly. "And so naturally I couldn't arrest you for the possession of grass, since the possession of real grass is not a felony. Not even a misdemeanor, as far as I know."

Whitman quickly removed the check I'd written from his wallet and then raised his voice, as though he were speaking into a faulty microphone. "And since there is no case, I can hardly charge a fee, now, can I? Therefore, I, Cyrus O'Connel Whitman, on this Friday, April 9, 1971, do hereby tear up your check, Mr. Randolph."

Judge Pender also spoke firmly and loudly. "And I, Judge Amos Whitman Pender, do hereby witness the act. And I *assure* you and all who may be interested that nothing like this will *ever* happen again."

"What about the charge of parking in a loading zone?" I asked. "And also the contempt of court?"

Sheriff O'Connel snapped his fingers. "Now that I think it over, Judge, I don't remember those loading-zone signs ever being in *exactly* those spots before. I'll just bet that some of the kids were playing a prank."

Pender chuckled. "And in that case, Mr. Randolph, I certainly couldn't try you or fine you for contempt of court." He hastily removed forty-five dollars from his wallet and glanced significantly at

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the sheriff. "It's your move now."

Sheriff O'Connel matched the forty-five with forty-five of his own.

They waited for me to leave.

I now had all of my money back, which, of course, had been my only objective. I am not a government agent.

As a matter of fact, you might say that I operate from the other end of the spectrum and therefore know how to take care of myself in situations such as this.

Also I recognize a good thing when I see it.

I smiled. "I've been thinking of leaving the government service and settling down in some nice quiet place. Like this town, for instance."

They did not seem enthusiastic about the idea.

"All kinds of opportunities here," I said. "Now, take that traffic light in the center of town. You've got the red on the top and the green on the bottom—just like it is almost everywhere else. But why not *reverse* the colors? That way you'd catch the *color-blind* drivers who pass through here and depend on the normal arrangement."

Sheriff O'Connel smiled thoughtfully. "Of course we'd have to warn the folks around here about the lights so they'll be careful and not get into accidents on that corner."

"And another thing," I said. "When a man comes into town with ninety dollars in cash, don't take it *all* away from him. Be satisfied with fifty. That way he leaves here not quite sure whether he's been taken or not, and he's not likely to complain to anybody important."

I had other ideas about the town.

"Sit down, gentlemen," I said. "I have a few more things to tell you, and I know you'll be interested."

All of this happened almost a year ago.

Today our swimming pool is paid for and we're now working on a golf course. And we do still manage to meet our overhead, other expenses, and administration costs.

People have been suggesting that I run for mayor. I might at that. I have the feeling that in my official capacity—and with a little wheeling and dealing, of course—I could bring that shoe factory into town.

